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Writing Exercises and Handouts: Preparing to Write a Research Paper

A major goal of my seminar, “The Anglo-Saxons: Scholars, Saints and Heroes” (MEDVL 101.3), was to help students develop the skills they would need to write a successful research paper. During the course of the semester, I addressed some of these skills with exercises and handouts in the following three categories: integrating quotations; critiquing secondary scholarship; and finding relevant secondary sources.

I. Integrating Quotations

One of the things I encountered most frequently in students’ papers was an over-reliance on direct quotations. In shorter papers, primary sources were quoted at length without explication; in research papers, quotations from secondary authors stood in place of the students’ own words. Because this was a persistent problem in both analytical essays and research papers, I addressed the issue of integrating quotations twice this semester: I distributed exercises that dealt with primary sources at the beginning of the term; and I focused on integrating both primary and secondary materials in the final weeks of the course, once students had begun their final research.

1. Text summary and quotation formatting (page 4). Early in the semester, I asked my students to summarize a long episode of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* in no more than seventy-five words. Students wrote their summaries at home, and everyone read their work in class the next day (I collected the summaries afterwards). Since the original passage was a long narrative with many expository details, students were forced to make choices about what information was most important and what could be omitted. The summaries varied significantly in their scope and focus, and it was productive for students to realize that it is possible to produce so many diverse interpretations of a single set of events.

I initially developed this exercise as a way to help students reduce the amount of summary in their papers: asking them to render fifteen pages in two or three sentences meant that they needed to be precise and concise in their paraphrases. But as I saw more and more students using direct quotations simply to provide plot summary, I began placing more emphasis on when they should paraphrase and when they should quote primary sources. As a complement to the summary assignment and our work on MLA citations, I created a worksheet that demonstrated how to

format primary quotations. In addition to providing a visual exemplar for integrating quotations according to MLA guidelines, these examples prompted a long discussion about when it is necessary to quote a primary source and when it is better to paraphrase.

2. Integrating sources (pages 5-6). At the end of the semester, when we began work on the research papers, I revisited the topic of source integration and provided my students with further examples of how to use quotations effectively. The first page of this handout addressed the question of when to quote and when to paraphrase, this time considering both primary and secondary texts. Whereas the earlier handout on formatting quotations provided good examples for students to follow, this exercise required students to decide whether quotations and paraphrases were used correctly, and whether they faithfully represented the source author's intentions or perverted the true meaning of the text. I gave the class about five minutes to work through the examples individually before we discussed them as a group.

The second page of this handout focused on block quotations, which I discouraged in all written assignments except for the research paper. On this worksheet, I provided some basic rules about using block quotations and two examples – one good and one bad. After reading through the rules, we considered the merits and drawbacks of each sample quotation. Like the examples on the first page, these generated considerable discussion: students frequently disagreed about whether or not direct quotations were necessary; and because examples were drawn from course readings, the class was able to debate the merits of each example based on its broader context.

II. Critiquing Secondary Scholarship: Fred Robinson's "Beowulf" (page7)

This worksheet was displayed as an overhead on the day that the class discussed Fred Robinson's article, "*Beowulf*," which provides a literary critique of the poem. We had spent the previous three weeks reading and discussing *Beowulf*, and students had already turned in their first of two essays on the poem. They had read Robinson's article for homework, and I had asked them to underline the article's thesis and the main point of each paragraph. In creating the accompanying in-class exercise, I anticipated the written critiques of secondary sources that I would assign in the early stages of the research projects.

During the first half of the class period, students divided into small groups and produced short written summaries of Robinson's argument. The groups were asked to consider what they liked and disliked about the article – what they thought of the author's writing style and whether or not they agreed with his arguments. Once the students were clear on what the author's argument

was, they were in a position to discuss whether his assertions were valid based on the source text, *Beowulf*. After each group had shared its reactions, we considered an excerpt of the article together as a class, comparing it with two passages from the poem. By referring directly to the medieval source, students were able to draw their own conclusions about one of Robinson's more controversial points.

The main goal of this exercise was to encourage students to think critically about the secondary sources that they would eventually encounter in their own research projects. While outside scholarship is central to undergraduate research, students rarely realize that they can – and should – question assertions posited by established authors. After a fifty-minute discussion of this article, the opinion of the class was split almost evenly concerning the argument cited on the worksheet: just over half the class thought that Robinson's assertion was justified by a close reading of the poem, while the slight minority of students believed that an analysis of the primary text undermined the validity of the author's point.

The texts used in this exercise are:

- Liuzza, R.M. (ed. and trans.) *Beowulf*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000.
- Robinson, Fred C. "Beowulf." *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 142-59.

III. Choosing Secondary Sources (page 8)

This worksheet provided a supplement to the class's library orientation session. I distributed it after I had reviewed the students' preliminary bibliographies for the research paper.

My class had little trouble locating secondary sources for their research: using the Cornell library catalogue and electronic databases, most students came up with five or six secondary sources for their preliminary bibliographies. Many of these sources, however, would not be helpful for the projects at hand: some offered outdated scholarship; some were too broad or narrow in scope; some were aimed at a popular rather than a scholarly audience.

This worksheet aimed to reproduce the students' own experience with the library catalogue and help them narrow down their lists of sources. Using the catalogue, I entered two search terms for an imaginary research topic – Anglo-Saxon kingship – and distributed ten of the first twenty results. Based only on the catalogue entries, I asked students to decide which books they would consult first, which books they might look at as their research progressed, and which books would be the least helpful. The class generally agreed about which books were the most and least useful; consideration of the more ambiguous catalogue entries generated lively debate.

Text Summary

In about 75 words, summarize Edwin's conversion to Christianity. Which details need to be included? Which details can be omitted? **Include a word count at the end of your summary. Your summary should be within 10 words of the word limit!**

Formatting Quotations

A sample quotation, in full:

Should history tell of good men and their good estate, the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse, and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing in the sight of God (Bede 3).

Starting a quotation in the middle of the author's sentence:

Bede asserts that when he tells stories about good men, "the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good" (Bede 3).

Removing parts of the quotation:

Bede makes the following claim in his prologue: "should history tell of good men... the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good" (Bede 3).

Inserting words or changing tense in a quotation:

Bede claims that if history "record[s] the evil ends of wicked men... [the] listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse" (Bede 3).

Splitting up a quotation:

"Should [history] record the evil ends of wicked men," writes Bede, "the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse" (Bede 3).

Quoting direct speech:

After Edwin recognizes Paulinus' sign, Bede relates that "Paulinus raised him up and said in a voice that seemed familiar, 'First you have escaped with God's help from the hands of the foes you feared'" (Bede 94).

Coifi, the pagan priest, is one of the chief advocates of conversion, explaining to the king that "none of your followers has devoted himself more earnestly than I have to the worship of our gods, but nevertheless there are many who receive greater benefits and greater honor from you than I do" (Bede 95).

Integrating Sources

When should you use direct quotations from a primary text? When should you paraphrase or summarize?

Grendel did not have ordinary human hands, for “at the end of each nail / was a sharp tip, most like steel, / heathen talons, the terrible spikes” (*Beowulf* 984-86).

The *Beowulf* poet makes it clear that his characters are not Christians, explicitly calling them “heathens” and describing their pagan gods as “idols” and “the soul-slayer” (*Beowulf* 175-80).

When he heard of Grendel’s attacks, Beowulf “commanded to be made / a good wave-crosser, and said that war-king / he would seek out over the swan’s riding, / the renowned prince, when he was in need of men” (*Beowulf* 198-201).

In a long speech, Hrothgar tells Beowulf to be a good king, discussing God’s kindness to men, discouraging the young warrior from following the example of evil rulers, warning him against pride and wickedness, and finally reminding him that death is inevitable: “in one fell swoop / death, o warrior, will overwhelm you” (*Beowulf* 1777-78).

When should you use direct quotations from a secondary text? When should you paraphrase or summarize?

The detailed descriptions of the mead-hall in *Beowulf* have parallels in the remains of early Anglo-Saxon buildings. The poem’s references to a gabled roof, door hinges, iron fittings, and wall hangings – all of which have been found at early English archeological sites – suggest that the poet based his accounts on the great halls of his own time (Webster 214-16).

Robinson argues that references to divine beings in *Beowulf* do not refer to the Christian God, asserting that “editors and translators of *Beowulf* in the past have done a disservice to readers by capitalizing the first letter of these terms whenever they occur” (Robinson 151). Although editors admittedly do add capitalization, the contexts in which these references to a single almighty god appear suggest that the poet actually had the Christian God in mind.

Dragons do not often appear in early medieval secular literature. Although Beowulf’s dragon plays an important role in the poem, “dragons, real dragons, essential both to the machinery and the ideas of a poem or tale, are actually rare. In northern literature there are only *two* that are significant” (Tolkien 109).

Are all quotations and paraphrases cited in the right context? Is the author’s meaning being depicted faithfully? Are the author’s words being twisted to support an unfounded argument?

The author clearly disapproves of violence and thinks that the conflict between the Danes and the Grendelkin should be settled peacefully, asserting that “that was no good exchange, / that those on both sides should have to bargain / with the lives of friends” (*Beowulf* 1304-06).

Robinson believes that people should stop editing *Beowulf* and only read the poem in the original manuscript, since editors pervert the meaning of the poem with their reckless capitalization (151).

Integrating Quotations (cont.) Using Block Quotations

When should you use block quotations?

- Use block quotations when you are citing a passage that takes up more than three lines of your paper. Single space and indent the quotation, and do not use quotation marks.
- Be sure that you have a strong transition at the beginning and end of the quotation to put it into context.
- Like regular quotations, block quotations should be directly relevant to your point. If you are not specifically referring to and explaining each part of your block quotation, *it's too long!* Cut it down so that you are actually able to analyze the entire quotation.
- Do not use block quotations to convey plot details: summarize the important points in your own words instead.
- People don't like to read block quotations! Because they are set off from the rest of your paper, they're easy to skip without reading – and the last thing you want is for your reader *not* to read your paper.

An evil use of a block quotation. Do not imitate.

According to Bede, Edwin did not force his subjects to convert to Christianity.

When the king had heard his words, he answered that he was both willing and bound to accept the faith which Paulinus taught. He said, however, that he would confer about this with his loyal chief men and his counselors so that, if they agreed with him, they might all be consecrated together in the waters of life. Paulinus agreed and the king did as he had said. A meeting of his council was held and each one was asked in turn what he thought of this doctrine hitherto unknown to them and this new worship of God which was being proclaimed (Bede 95).

After various speeches, the council unanimously decided to accept the new faith, and the entire kingdom was baptized.

An acceptable use of a block quotation.

Bede offers specific examples of individuals' conversion to Christianity in order to demonstrate the triumph of the new faith over heathen practices. For instance, the pagan priest Coifi completely rejects his old religion with the following sentiment:

For a long time now I have realized that our religion is worthless; for the more diligently I sought the truth in our cult, the less I found it. Now I confess openly that the truth shines out clearly in this teaching which can bestow on us the gift of life, salvation, and eternal happiness. Therefore I advise your Majesty that we should promptly abandon and commit to the flames the temples and the altars which we have held sacred without reaping any benefit (Bede 96).

Because Coifi is a prominent religious leader, his refutation of paganism and his endorsement of Christianity lend the new faith credibility among the unconverted populace. Furthermore, by putting such confident words into the mouth of a man who had previously been the chief advocate of heathen worship, Bede demonstrates that even the most dedicated pagan must acknowledge Christianity as a superior religion.

Review Robinson's discussion of religious references on pages 150-51. He writes:

The poet mutes his allusions to the Germanic characters' religious beliefs. He does not deny their paganism... But the poem does not describe them as addressing prayers to Woden and the thunder-god or performing other pagan rites which would have shocked the Christian Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem. Rather he puts into their speeches allusions to "the almighty," "the ancient creator," or "the ruler." At times they use the word "god," but we have to remember that this word, then as now, was a generic term for any deity as well as a term which, in a specialized sense, could be used to refer to the Christian God.

How is this point argued? What is Robinson's evidence for this position? Having read the poem and seen these references to 'god' in context, does Robinson's assertion seem reasonable to you?

Compare two passages from the poem and decide whether or not you are convinced by this argument.Passage 1:

It is a wonder to say
How mighty God in His great spirit
Allots wisdom, lands and lordship
To mankind; He has control of everything.
At times He permits the thoughts of a man
In a mighty race to move in delights,
Gives him to hold in his homeland
The sweet joys of earth, a stronghold of men,
Grants him such power over his portion of the world,
A great kingdom, that he himself cannot
Imagine an end to it, in his folly...
At last his portion of pride within him
Grows and flourishes, while the guardian sleeps,
The soul's shepherd — that sleep is too sound,
Bound with cares, the slayer too close
Who, sinful and wicked, shoots from his bow.
Then he is struck in his heart, under his helmet
With a bitter dart — he knows no defense —
The strange, dark demands of evil spirits;
What he has long held seems too little,
Angry and greedy, he gives no golden rings
For vaunting boasts, and his final destiny
He neglects and forgets, since God, Ruler of glories,
Has given him a portion of honors.
In the end it finally comes about
That the loaned life-dwelling starts to decay
And falls, fated to die. (ll.1724–55)

Passage 2:

At times they offered honor to idols
At pagan temples, prayed aloud
That the soul-slayer might offer assistance
In the country's distress. Such was their custom,
The hope of heathens — they remembered hell
In their minds, they did not know the Maker,
The Judge of deeds, they did not know the Lord God,
Or even how to praise the heavenly Protector,
Wielder of glory. (ll.175–83)

Choosing Secondary Sources

The following sources turned up on a keyword search of the Cornell Library Catalogue. The search terms were "Anglo-Saxon" AND "king?". How can we narrow down this list of results? Consider:

- **Scope.** Does the book appear to focus on the right time period, geographical area, etc.? Is it too general or too specific for our topic?
- **Audience.** Does the book appear to be aimed at a scholarly or an amateur audience? Is it meant as an introduction to the subject? Or will its audience need specialized knowledge?
- **Format.** Is the book a collection of essays by one author? A series of lectures or papers by multiple authors? Or is it a complete book by a single scholar?
- **Author.** Is the book's author a scholar and an expert in his or her field?
- **Publisher.** Is the book issued by a reputable publisher or university press?
- **Date.** Does the book incorporate recent ideas and scholarship?

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| 1. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Fox, Peter.
An introduction to Anglo-Saxon kingship
Hockwold-cum-Wilton : Anglo-Saxon, 2004. |
| 2. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Karkov, Catherine E.
The ruler portraits of Anglo-Saxon England
Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Rochester, NY : Boydell Press, 2004. |
| 3. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Fletcher, R. A.
Bloodfeud : murder and revenge in Anglo-Saxon England
New York : Oxford University Press, 2003. |
| 4. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Rollason, D. W.
Northumbria, 500-1100 : creation and destruction of a kingdom
Cambridge, U.K. ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2003. |
| 5. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Leone, Bruno.
The Middle Ages
San Diego, Calif. : Greenhaven Press, c2002. |
| 6. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Cavill, Paul.
A treasury of Anglo-Saxon England : faith and wisdom in the lives of men and women, saints and kings
Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan, 2001. |
| 7. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Alcock, Leslie.
Arthur's Britain; history and archaeology, AD 367-634.
New York, St. Martin's Press, c1971 |
| 8. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Brooke, Christopher Nugent Lawrence.
The Saxon & Norman kings.
London, B.T. Batsford, c1963 |
| 9. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Baker, G. P.
The fighting kings of Wessex, a gallery of portraits
New York, Dodd, Mead & co., 1931. |
| 10. | Author/Creator:
Title:
Published: | Stubbs, William.
Lectures on early English history
London ; New York : Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906. |